

The Intersection of Home and Identity: An Exploration of Easterine Kire's Novel, *A Respectable Woman*

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Abstract:

North-Eastern frontier area is very apparent region for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society as well. North-Eastern frontier zone consists of seven states, called 'seven sisters' by their own dialectic languages. "*A Respectable Woman*" is a novel by Easterine Kire, a Nagaland-based author known for her thought-provoking and nuanced portrayals of life in Nagaland and the North East region of India. Easterine Kire, born in Kohima is an Angami Naga writer. Her works are insights into the Naga culture, history and also the traditions and customs of the Angami society.

The proposed paper explores the intricate relationship between home and identity in Easterine Kire's novel *A Respectable Woman*. Through a nuanced analysis of the protagonist's experiences, this paper explores how the concept of home shapes and is shaped by individual identity. The novel highlights the tensions between traditional expectations and personal desires, revealing the complexities of navigating cultural norms and societal pressures. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between home, identity, and culture, shedding light on the ways in which individuals negotiate their sense of self within the context of their homes and communities.

Keywords: Home, Identity, Cultural norms, societal expectations,

The North Eastern states of India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, are a treasure trove of diverse cultures, languages, and literary traditions. North-Eastern frontier zone consists of seven states, called 'seven sisters' by their own dialectic languages. The North East is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region in India and is a very ostensible region for its rich tribal culture, custom and patriarchal society as well. The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are mostly inhabited by a number of native tribes. Each tribe has its own distinct tradition of art, culture, dance, music and unique lifestyles. The numerous fairs and festivals celebrated by these communities and their friendly nature are irresistible attractions for the visitors. While women in mainland India and North East India share similar struggles, there are distinct differences in their experiences. Notably, Nagaland's tribal culture, comprising various tribes with unique dialects, is relatively free from societal issues like dowry, child marriage, and child labor, which are prevalent in mainland India. This region has produced a rich body of literature that reflects its unique history, mythology, and experiences. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the literary works of North Eastern writers, who are bringing attention to the region's distinct cultural identity and experiences through their writing.

The study of North Eastern literature in English offers valuable insights into the region's cultural, social, and historical contexts. It also highlights the diversity of Indian literature and challenges dominant narratives. By exploring the works of North Eastern writers, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity, culture, and belonging in this region. It also highlights the diversity of Indian literature and challenges dominant narratives.

Easterine Kire, was born in March 1959 to an Angami family in Kohima, Nagaland, currently lives in Northern Norway. She is a prominent Nagaland-based author known for her thought-provoking and nuanced portrayals of life in Nagaland and the North East region of India. Her works often explore themes of identity, culture, and belonging, offering valuable insights into the complexities of life in this region. Through her writing, Kire sheds light on the rich cultural heritage and traditions of Nagaland, while also highlighting the challenges and tensions that arise from the intersection of traditional and modern values. Majority of her works are based on the live realities of Nagaland. Her works are insights into the Naga culture, history and also the traditions and customs of the Angami society. The immense love for her native land and culture

is clearly depicted in her writings. Easterine Kire talks about how she depicts her native land in her art in an interview that

“There are many things in Naga society that are liberal and positive; education for children regardless of gender, encouragements of girls taking up professionals or studies formerly dominated by boys, a healthy acceptance of non-conventional roles and professionals”.
(Kire, 2019, p.389)

Kire became an acclaimed writer through her writings such as *A Naga Village Remembered* (2008), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter warm Wood* (2011), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013), *Don't Run My Love* (2017) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019). Many of her works are translated to Nepali, Uzbek, German, Norwegian languages. She is the first Naga tribal woman from Nagaland to win *Bal Sahitya Puraskar* for her ‘*Songs of the Thunder Clouds*’ in 2018 awarded by Sahitya Academy. She is well-known in North Eastern literature and her writing style always expresses a strong political and historical awareness when issues like identity and ethnicity are addressed.

Easterine Kire's novel *A Respectable Woman* offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of identity and home in the context of Nagaland. This paper examines the intersection of home and identity in the novel, highlighting the tensions and harmonies that emerge from the protagonist's experiences. Through a close reading of the text, this paper argues that the protagonist's identity is shaped by her experiences of home, which are influenced by social, cultural and personal factors.

A Respectable Woman (2019) chronicles the experiences of a generation in Nagaland through a blend of fiction and fact. Easterine Kire explores the lives of three women with unique traits in her book *A Respectable Woman*. The novel features three female characters: Kevinuo, Khonuo, and Beinuo. Kevinuo's mother is Khonuo. Kevinuo's friend is Beinuo. Each of the three women has a degree. Initially, Kevinuo is portrayed as a submissive and obedient Angami girl, but as the story unfolds, her transformation into a mature and independent individual becomes apparent. After completing her education, Kevinuo begins working at a school in Kohima, where she witnesses the restrictive lives of married women, prompting her to reject the institution of marriage. Easterine Kire depicts marriage as a suffocating constraint that denies women their freedom, happiness, and autonomy.

Through Kevinuo's character, Kire challenges traditional Angami norms, presenting a woman who defies societal expectations. Kevinuo's decision to adopt her friend's daughter, Uvi, and raise her outside of marriage, serves as a powerful example of women's empowerment and independence. The novel highlights the liberating impact of education on women, enabling them to form their own identities, make informed decisions, and assert their opinions. Ultimately, the book presents a compelling narrative of women's empowerment and self-determination.

In *A Respectable Woman*, home is a multifaceted concept that encompasses cultural, emotional, and physical aspects. The protagonist's home is a site of belonging, comfort, and security, but it is also a space where she grapples with societal expectations and cultural norms. The novel highlights the ways in which home can be both a source of identity and a site of confinement.

“Being a working girl was one of the greatest joys of my life”, Khonuo claims in these lines. For the first time, I was earning money and providing for myself” (A Respectable Woman, 27)

The protagonist's identity is shaped by her experiences of home, which are influenced by her cultural background, family, and societal expectations. As she navigates her relationships with her family and community, she must confront the tensions between her own desires and the expectations placed upon her. The novel portrays the complexities of identity formation, highlighting the ways in which individuals negotiate multiple identities and roles. Economic empowerment and education allow women to be self-sufficient, so even widows like Khonuo don't have to rely on others. Khonuo was able to make her own decisions because she was financially independent.

“Ours is a generation that has seen the devastation of war. We are people who know what it's like to lose everything almost overnight, homes, loved ones, and life as we knew it before the war. When death is so imminent, some things in life simply stop being important.”(A Respectable Woman, 37)

The intersection of home and identity is a central theme in *A Respectable Woman*. The protagonist's experiences of home shape her identity, but her identity also influences her perception of home. The novel highlights the tensions that can arise when individual desires conflict with societal expectations, and the ways in which individuals negotiate these tensions. Easterine Kire's novel, *A Respectable Woman*, explores the significant transformations that have

shaped Naga society, particularly in the context of gender relations and women's identity, against the backdrop of the Battle of Kohima.

The Battle of Kohima served as a catalyst for profound cultural shifts, prompting Naga communities to reevaluate their beliefs and practices. As a result, women's roles underwent a significant transformation, as they took on responsibilities traditionally assigned to men due to the absence of men during the war. Feminist thinkers like Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Spivak, and Virginia Woolf have highlighted the importance of women's identity and agency, challenging patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women.

“Nothing was left standing. The place was unrecognizable. There was tin strewn on the ground, and a few burnt planks were all that was left of our house. We cried when we saw the total destruction the war had wrought”. (A Respectable Woman, 9)

Kire's novel examines the evolving responsibilities of women in Naga society, particularly through the character of Kevinuo, a revolutionary Naga woman who fights for her community and identity. Kevinuo's story mirrors the larger cultural shifts in Naga society, challenging the patriarchal structures that have historically viewed women as objects. The narrative of Beinuo, whose life is devastated by her husband's adherence to strict Naga customs, further highlights the destructive nature of patriarchal norms and the need for gender equality and social change.

Kevinuo's mother once said, *“Once she is married, we consider her to be her husband's property” (Kire, 2019, p. 103)*. Instead of assisting and protecting women from this assault, the women tolerate domestic violence. They view a woman as her husband's property and embrace it as acceptable and natural. These ladies have analogous beliefs and have observed comparable trends in their homes.

Conclusion:

Thus, Easterin Kire's *A Respectable Woman* offers a nuanced exploration of the intersection of home and identity. Through the protagonist's experiences, the novel highlights the complexities of identity formation and the ways in which home can shape and be shaped by individual identity. This paper argues that the novel portrays the importance of considering the cultural, social, and personal factors that influence individual experiences of home and identity.

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